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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HANOI 000005

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [TH](#) [VM](#)

SUBJECT: Bat Nha Wrap-up: VN government makes its case while Lang Mai monks seek refuge in Thailand

REF: A) 09 HANOI 839; B) 09 HANOI 1398; C) 09 HCMC 669  
D) 09 HCMC 672; E) HANOI 873; F) HANOI 03; G) HANOI 01

CLASSIFIED BY: Virginia Palmer, DCM; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: For months, Lang Mai followers in Lam Dong province have been cajoled, harried, and harassed into dispersing to their home provinces throughout Vietnam. The last of the Lang Mai adherents -- a group of nine nuns -- left Phuoc Hue pagoda on December 29 in advance of the GVN-imposed deadline of December 31. 110 of the ousted monks and nuns have now reassembled at a Lang Mai follower's house near Bangkok, with support from Lang Mai groups in France. Vietnamese authorities continue to take a defensive tone in response to criticism of the government's handling of the situation. During its January 11 press briefing, the Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) offered no new information, sought to minimize the government's role in the events, and argued that the GVN simply acted at the request of the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha (VBS) -- an account rejected by the Lam Dong provincial VBS. The Bat Nha saga has simmered down for now. The episode marks a tactical victory for the GVN, which has succeeded in breaking up the Bat Nha community. The price of this victory, however, may be high: the GVN's mishandling of Bat Nha, especially its role in allowing the violence, threatens to overshadow progress on religious freedom issues and gives further ammunition to those who want to "punish" Vietnam. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Monks and nuns associated with the Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh's Lang Mai order have been in tenuous circumstances since their forced eviction from Bat Nha pagoda in Lam Dong on September 27, 2009 (ref A). The refuge they sought at the nearby Phuoc Hue pagoda proved temporary, as the Lang Mai followers were again ordered to leave by December 31 (ref B). In the interim, the Lang Mai followers faced continued harassment (ref C). After a visiting EU delegation was hindered from visiting Phuoc Hue on December 9 (ref D), a group of officials from the Lam Dong VBS was itself set upon at Phuoc Hue by a collection of obscenity-shouting individuals posing as monks, according to the Deputy Head of the Lam Dong VBS, the Venerable Thich Vienh. Even the Lang Mai's "farewell letter" -- a gracious account of their two years in Lam Dong -- proved controversial, with one nun reporting that the owner of a photocopy shop was threatened with a VND 50 million fine and the revocation of his operating license if he did business with Lang Mai.

¶3. (SBU) Beginning in June and through the end of the year, the Ambassador and Mission personnel met repeatedly with senior MFA, MPS, and CRA officials, as well as officials in Lam Dong, to condemn the violence and to urge that differences be resolved peacefully and in accordance with Vietnamese law (ref E). The Ambassador used his January 12 meeting with VFM Pham Binh Minh (ref

F) to reiterate our concerns and to warn that the GVN's handling of Bat Nha threatened to overshadow progress in other areas. ConGenOff visited Lam Dong in November to meet with provincial officials, VBS leaders, and the Lang Mai practitioners to help resolve the matter. Subsequent meetings in December in Hanoi with senior officials from the MPS and CRA spurred defensive rhetoric, but no policy changes. Attempts by EU officials were similarly frustrated.

#### Lang Mai Followers in Thailand

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¶4. (C) Faced with the GVN's order to leave by December 31, many Lang Mai monks and nuns chose to relocate to Thailand. Lang Mai followers confirmed that as many as 30 monks and 80 nuns from Phuoc Hue have moved, quietly and in small groups, to the Pak Chong District near Bangkok, where they are staying at the house of a devoted Lang Mai follower who plans to build a Lang Mai monastery with assistance of the Lang Mai order in France. According to

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ConGen contacts in the Lang Mai order, all have valid ID documents, but entered Thailand as tourists (as Vietnamese citizens they can get tourist visas on arrival that are valid for 30 days). Our contact says the monks/nuns are happy to be able to practice together in Thailand, or anywhere else they would be allowed to follow their faith legally and as a group.

¶5. (C) Of the three senior monks detained in September at Bat Nha, Phap Si (previously under house arrest in Nha Trang) has according to contacts left Vietnam for France, Phap Tu is still in Hanoi, and Phap Hoi remains in hiding though he is in contact with the Consulate by phone.

#### The GVN Line Rejected by the Local VBS

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¶6. (SBU) In an attempt to diffuse ongoing interest in Bat Nha, representatives of the MFA, Lam Dong People's Committee, and CRA briefed the press January 11 in Hanoi (post attended). The briefing provided little new information, with officials rehashing a detailed timeline of events, along with specific decrees related to the events. The goal of the briefing -- to minimize the government's involvement. The MFA reiterated the now-standard line that the tensions at Bat Nha were related to an internal dispute between two different orders of Buddhism and that the grant for the Lang Mai followers to reside at Bat Nha was only temporary. Officials insisted that the government did not become involved, though it monitored the situation closely, until assistance was requested by the VBS to help maintain peace. Blame was placed with Thich Nhat Hanh, who, according to the GVN, had rebuffed repeated attempts by the Vietnamese Embassy in Paris to open a dialogue. The officials again denied that violence had taken place that merited criminal investigation and insisted that the 190 Lang Mai followers had been asked to return home and register with local authorities according to Vietnamese law. According to the briefing, 42 monks and nuns have returned to Hue; it was not yet known where the remaining followers were located. There was no mention of Lang Mai followers leaving the country.

¶7. (C) The GVN narrative doesn't add up, according to contacts in the Lam Dong VBS, who say that many Buddhists in the region are

sympathetic to the Lam Dong adherents but have mostly been prevented from helping. The Venerable Thich Vienh reports that the Lam Dong VBS sent a petition to the Government, the National CRA, and the Central VBS, as well as to relevant authorities in Lam Dong province, on December 18 demanding that the individuals who harassed, sometimes violently, the Lang Mai followers at Phuoc Hue on December 10, 11, and 14 be punished. Vienh said that a substantial number of Lam Dong VBS members would resign from the GVN-regulated Sangha if their petition is ignored.

18. (SBU) Comment: The situation of the Lang Mai monks and nuns appears over for now, with the government, obstinate to the end, scoring a tactical victory. The price of this victory, however, is considerable ill will, and not just -- as the government would like to have it -- among soft-headed members of the foreign media and diplomatic corps. The local VBS, usually docile, is extremely upset, as are sympathetic voices in the Buddhist community in Hanoi, Hue, and elsewhere. As in other situations (the recent Dong Chiem crucifix incident, ref F, comes to mind), a reflexive obsession with order and control has blown what ought to have been a minor dispute into an episode with much larger consequences for the government's credibility. End Comment.

19. (U) This cable was coordinated with ConGen Ho Chi Minh City. Michalak